DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 459 933 PS 030 013

TITLE	No Guns, Please. We Are Children!
INSTITUTION	United Nations Children's Fund, New York, NY.
PUB DATE	2001-07-00
NOTE	8p.
AVAILABLE FROM	UNICEF, Division of Communication, 3 United Nations Plaza, H-9F, New York, NY 10017. E-mail: pubdoc@unicef.org; Web site: http://www.unicef.org.
PUB TYPE	Opinion Papers (120)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS	Armed Forces; Change Strategies; *Children; Developed Nations; Developing Nations; Foreign Countries; Government Role; *Gun Control; *Guns; *Violence
IDENTIFIERS	*UNICEF; United Nations

ABSTRACT

Noting that the spread of small firearms worldwide creates a serious global problem, especially for children, this pamphlet presents information on the physical and emotional damage done to children from small arms and light weapons and describes the work of UNICEF to counteract the damage. Highlighted in the discussion are the use of child soldiers and the development of a culture of violence. The work of UNICEF, as part of the Global Movement for Children, calls for leadership and accountability at every level of society to ensure that children are free to grow to adulthood in health, peace, and dignity. Guiding principles in the campaign against small arms and light weapons are delineated and include implementing laws to protect children from any participation in hostilities, demobilizing and reintegrating child soldiers into society as a matter of priority, and promoting an integrated approach to the issue of the proliferation of small arms and light weapons. (KB)

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ED 459 933

PS 030013

NO GUNS, PLEASE
WE ARE CHILDREN!

"The spread of small arms creates a serious global problem and requires an equally urgent response because the lives and futures of children are at stake. These weapons have extinguished more young lives than they have protected."

– *Carol Bellamy*
Executive Director, UNICEF

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Small arms and light weapons cause profound physical and emotional damage, particularly to children, and affect their welfare.

- It is estimated that since 1990, more than 2 million children have been killed in wars, 6 million have been seriously injured and more than 22 million have been driven from their homes. The vast majority of the casualties are directly attributable to small arms and light weapons.
- In societies destabilized by the use of small arms and light weapons, children are denied many of their human rights, including their rights to freedom from violence and exploitation, survival and development, health care, education and care within a family environment. As a result, hard-won developmental gains are often lost and may even be reversed.
- In conflict situations, small arms and light weapons heighten levels of violence and prevent humanitarian assistance from reaching those who need it.
- In post-conflict situations, they perpetuate the high levels of violence created by conflicts long after peace agreements are signed.
- In communities enjoying relative peace, children witness and are traumatized by the use of small arms and light weapons in domestic violence and in disputes. Children also become accidental victims because adults fail to keep the weapons out of their reach.
- The use of small arms and light weapons makes gender imbalances more dangerous to women and girls. Men often use the weapons against women and girls in acts of violence, abuse and repression.

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SOLDIERS

One consequence of the availability of small arms and light weapons and their subsequent use in conflicts around the world is the unconscionable use of child soldiers. Exploited and abused, children are easily trained to handle small arms. An estimated 300,000 children worldwide are currently fighting in adult wars.

A global consensus has developed calling for an end to the use of children as soldiers. The Convention on the Rights of the Child sets out comprehensive principles and standards to guide all actions and attitudes towards children. The protections it affords children affected by armed conflict were enhanced in May 2000, when the UN General Assembly adopted an Optional Protocol to the Convention on the involvement of children in armed conflict. The Optional Protocol establishes 18 as the minimum age that will be permitted for direct participation in hostilities.

UNICEF making a difference

UNICEF urges governments to send an unequivocal message that all children – up to the age of 18 years – will not participate in any form of hostilities and calls on governments to ratify the Optional Protocol on the involvement of children in armed conflict, whose preventive measures are the best protection for children. UNICEF also urges countries to ratify the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court that makes it a war crime to use children below the age of 15 in armed conflict.

In cases where prevention is no longer possible, UNICEF urges the immediate release of child soldiers and their safe and prompt return to their families and communities. In Colombia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Sierra Leone, Sri Lanka, Sudan and other countries, UNICEF and its partners are demobilizing and reintegrating children who have been used as combatants, porters and cooks and have been subjected to sexual exploitation in combat situations. Ongoing support for these children includes psychosocial care, schooling, vocational training, health care and family reunification.

A OF VIOLENCE

Children need to learn that violence is not an acceptable means of ending disagreement or resolving conflict.

Efforts must be ongoing to overcome the destructive messages that small arms and light weapons are essential instruments for survival and protection in daily life. Governments must support communities in eliminating the insecurity, fear and instability that often lead people to acquire and keep guns. Regulations are needed to ensure that small arms and light weapons are not easy to acquire and are never accessible to children.

UNICEF at work

- Promoting schools as 'zones of peace' in which children can learn and develop, safe from violence and free from the presence of small arms and light weapons.
- Teaching children constructive self-expression and non-violent conflict-resolution skills through peace education programmes in Angola, Colombia, Sri Lanka and other countries.
- Linking landmine awareness to a campaign in Albania that highlights the threat of small arms and light weapons to children under the banner, 'Don't Let Guns Kill Our Dreams'.
- Conducting pilot projects in Kosovo, Liberia, Somalia and Tajikistan to counter the use of small arms and light weapons among children and to build a culture of peace.
- Supporting activities in Croatia that reduce children's access to weapons in their homes.

In societies where small arms and light weapons are commonly used in disputes, children come to regard the weapons as necessary for safety and security.

Popular culture portrays these weapons as glamorous, and in countries where gun violence is common, this has fuelled the culture of violence.

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PARTNERSHIPS FOR CHILDREN

UNICEF, as part of the Global Movement for Children, is calling for leadership and accountability at every level of society – from governments, the private sector, media, non-governmental organizations, religious and community leaders and households – to ensure that every child is free to grow to adulthood in health, peace and dignity. The UN Conference on the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects, in July 2001, and the UN Special Session on Children, in September 2001, provide important opportunities to exercise such leadership. In the lead-up to the Special Session on Children, UNICEF and its partners are supporting action to protect children from war and violence and the impact of small arms and light weapons.

Guiding principles in the campaign against small arms and light weapons

To keep weapons out of children's hands, as well as out of the hands of those who violate and neglect children's rights, it is important to:

- Implement laws to protect children from any form of participation in hostilities and from having access to small arms and light weapons.
- Demobilize and reintegrate child soldiers into society as a matter of priority and in a manner that respects the child's dignity and fosters the child's active participation in society.

SMALL ARMS are designed for personal use. They include revolvers and self-loading pistols, assault rifles, sub-machine guns, rifles and carbines and light machine-guns.

LIGHT WEAPONS, such as heavy machine guns, portable anti-aircraft guns and missiles, mortars and anti-tank missile and rocket systems, are sometimes mounted on vehicles and require more than one person to operate.

- Collect and destroy small arms and light weapons through community programmes in which civil society plays a key role.
- Promote a culture of peace, including through support to peace education programmes and other non-violent approaches to conflict resolution.
- Promote an integrated approach to the issue of the proliferation of small arms and light weapons, which recognizes both the demand and supply side of the small arms equation and ensures the adoption of measures that target manufacturers and those trading and benefiting from the sale of small arms.
- Encourage respect for arms embargoes, including the criminalization and punishment of violators.
- Establish Codes of Conduct to improve restraints on the transfer of small arms and light weapons, particularly to conflict zones where children's rights are violated and they are used as soldiers.

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Sudanese children walk away from an assortment of small arms and light weapons they have just discarded

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Visit the UN Department for Disarmament Affairs/UNICEF exhibit 'Taking aim at small arms: Defending children's rights' at: http://www.unicef.org/smallarms/exhibit/

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July 2001

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